

## Courts to School Program

By Michael Dillon, 55th District Court

**NEED FOR JUDICIAL EDUCATION:** The district court has been called the “Peoples’ Court.” It is referred to as the “Peoples’ Court” due to the types of cases heard by the court, as well as the diversity and number of people who access the district court on a daily basis. Even with this distinction, most individuals have little or no knowledge of district court operations. Court rules, procedures and policies are generally foreign and/or misunderstood.

Citizens learn about the court system both formally and informally. Both means provide little if any practical information. Our schools are charged with formally educating students about the workings of government. Most schools develop curriculums that focus on federal government. Students are taught about the federal court system. There is little emphasis on the Michigan court system, and even less of an emphasis on the district court.

Citizens learn informally about the court system through the media, the entertainment industry and the experience of others. This type of information is often inaccurate and misleading.

Acknowledging these misperceptions, the court felt a responsibility to reach out to the local schools in Ingham County by offering a judicial education program that was both realistic and practical.

**COURT-TO-SCHOOL PROGRAM:** In March of 2009, the 55th District Court launched its Court-To-School Program at Okemos High School. The program was modeled after the highly successful program implemented by the 12th Judicial District Court in Jackson County. The 55th District Court’s Court-to-School Program was developed after meeting with school officials from Okemos High School. This program provides high school students with a better understanding of the judicial system and demonstrates the personal, social and legal ramifications from substance abuse. The program consists of two phases. The first phase consists of educating students about the court system and substance abuse through the traditional style of classroom instruction. The second phase consists of vicarious learning where students observe actual court proceedings being held at their school.

The court requested permission from the State Court Administrative Office through a local administrative order to hold court at Okemos High School. Prosecutorial staff and defense attorneys were asked if they would be willing to participate in the program. Each defendant was informed that participation was voluntary.

Prior to the actual court date, Beryl Frenger, Chief Probation Officer, visited Okemos High School and met with the social studies classes. She gave a presentation concerning what the students would observe when court was held at school. In addition, she discussed the problems associated with substance abuse. Ms. Frenger drew upon her years of experience as a probation officer and provided the classes with real-life examples of substance abuse cases.

On the morning of March 27, 2009, The Honorable Thomas P. Boyd conducted his morning session of court at Okemos High School. Approximately 500 students observed court proceedings that day.

A few days after the program, the court received a letter from Dr. John Lanzetta, Principal of Okemos High School. Dr. Lanzetta said:

The entire project was an extraordinary success. The instruction by the probation officer was exceptional. The court hearings and question and answer sessions were riveting and enlightening. All aspects of the program contributed enormously to the education of our students. Indeed, discussions among students continued throughout the day, and I am confident they will continue in classrooms and hallways for some time to come.

Dr. Lanzetta concluded his letter with: “I look forward to a continued partnership with your court in an ongoing effort to enhance our social studies curriculum and our students’ understanding of the legal process.”

**COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY OUTREACH:** The 55th District Court is committed to educating the community about the district court through community outreach programs. The Court-to-School Program is an example of the court’s commitment. The two-phase program provides for a unique learning experience for the students. Many of the issues during the presentation phase become reality when observed during the court phase of the program.

Because both court and school officials have deemed the Court-to-School Program a success, the court has begun to make the Court-to-School Program available to the other school districts in Ingham County.



*Judge Thomas Boyd*